

Gerald's  
Wife  
By  
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FORRESTER

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Broderick swung off the 4:35 express, walked quickly up the steps leading from the railroad platform and took his first look at Pineville. Those who lived in Pineville proper were content to call it Pineville. Gerald had written that they did not live in Pineville proper, but in Pineville-by-the-Sea, otherwise Pineville improper.

All that Broderick saw were pines, plenty of them, a flat white ribbon of roadway and a bit of a postoffice, roughly shingled, in the midst of the nearest clump of pines. He stepped into the postoffice as the central spot of civilization. Some one was stamping letters behind the glass inclosure, a girl with smooth dark hair. Beatrice had smooth dark hair.

He watched the girl stamping letters with interest and wondered why some one did not tell her to wear her smooth dark hair in two soft braids around her head, crown fashion, as Beatrice did.

"Where do the Vaughans live, please?" he asked finally, when the stamping ceased.

"The Vaughans? Oh, Mr. Gerald Vaughan and his wife? It's a brown house down near the shore, with a wide veranda and a funny roof, about a mile straight down the road."

A wide veranda and a funny roof. That sounded like Gerald. He wondered how Gerald's wife Beatrice. Beatrice was artistic, but not artistically eccentric. She had a horror of things odd, bizarre, so-called bohemian, and yet she had married Gerald. And Gerald's brother knew that Gerald was utterly odd, bizarre and bohemian, so called.

He walked on down the flat white ribbonned roadway and wondered whether he would find her like the girl Gerald had always admired. A lithesome, limp, blessed damozel type, with close silky gowns and loose floppy hair. Last summer she had not been that type. He thought of the trim girl figure holding the rudder of the Water Lily that last day. She had been more than the sort of a girl to fall in love with. She had been a good fellow, a stanch friend. And as he watched her he had stopped rowing, and they had drifted slowly in the sunset glow that flooded the lake while he told her.

There had been no actual engagement. He had nothing to reproach her with. He had not been in a position to ask her to be his wife then, but he had thought a girl like Beatrice had meant more by a kiss, a hand clasp, a few vague words of understanding, than other girls. He had thought she might wait until next summer. And now, in April, he had returned to New York to learn that Gerald was in disgrace, had married on nothing, eloped to Pineville-by-the-Sea, N. C., and his wife was Beatrice Stafford.

Gerald's mother had said they were penniless. Gerald's father had remarked that he didn't give a rap. They could exist upon love and art.

More or less for Beatrice's sake and a little for Gerald's, Gerald's brother had taken it upon himself to visit the bridal couple and help Gerald. Smoothing his own love, he had made up his mind that as long as Beatrice had married a Vaughan she should not suffer from it.

There was no bell at the door of the little brown house with the funny roof. It was merely a bungalow in weathered shingles, and he pounded on the door lustily until it opened and Beatrice stood before him.

She was not the blessed damozel type yet. Her smooth dark hair was wound about her head in just the same crown fashion, and she wore a short dark blue linen skirt and a white shirt waist. The sleeves were rolled to her elbows, and from her finger tips to elbow dimples there was flour sprinkled. He had not expected to see her face to face so soon or alone. Neither had he expected her to act as she did. The color rose in her cheeks, tipping even her ears with pink. It was an old habit. He remembered it.

"I thought you were in London," she said.

"You don't give a fellow a very decent welcome after he's traveled from London to this wilderness to say congratulations!"

He stepped into the hall, after her. She hesitated and laughed, looking at her furred hands.

"I can't shake hands with you, and— and the biscuits are in the oven. I shall have to watch them. Do you mind coming out to the kitchen?"

He didn't mind. There appeared to be only three rooms—the studio-sitting room, the dining room and the kitchen. Collapsible ready-in-a-minute studio divans were in the sitting room and dining room in lieu of beds.

It was all charmingly, most uncomfortably odd, bizarre and bohemian.

"Where's Gerald?" he asked when he had found a chair in the kitchen.

Beatrice knelt beside the stove to look at the biscuit. He could not see her face.

"He went to the postoffice for the mail. You must have missed him."

"Well, what ever made him come to his last corner?"

"Oh, because it was the chance of something definite, you know! Don't you know?" she added quickly, seeing the puzzled look on his face. "Well, Gerald's chum, Netherby Ames, broke all to pieces last fall from overwork and so on, and he was ordered down here. And he couldn't afford to come and stay indefinitely, so he pulled a few wires, and things happened. He

was made postmaster here at Pineville. And he got lonesome and healthy and workful again a month ago, so Gerald's in his place, and he's in New York. Don't you see? It was really very definite and businesslike and right under the circumstances."

"Oh, certainly, under the circumstances," agreed Broderick. "So old Gerry's postmaster instead of artist."

"Both," she corrected. "He has lots of time to study, and it's good for him—the responsibility, I mean. You wouldn't know him."

"I suppose not," assented Broderick uneasily. He tried to reconcile his little circle of the universe, to make the chaotic jumble fall into place and harmonize. Gerald, Gerald the helpless, erratic, fantastic, irrational, joyous hearted, penniless artist, a person of matrimonial responsibility, a postmaster. But then he remembered the young smooth haired person stamping letters. Of course Gerald had found his usual way out of the difficulty. He had hired some Pineville lass to do the heavy work, and he drew the salary. It was like Gerald. But there was Beatrice, Beatrice making biscuits. He looked at her with troubled eyes, seeing endless vistas of Beatrices making biscuits throughout the years.

"Don't you miss New York?"

"Oh, so much!" she said. "I'll never be happy until I get back."

"Have you given up your own work?"

"Only for the time being. I shall take it up again, of course. I shall take it up again."

Broderick's hands tightened in a sudden grip. So she was to work again, turn out her endless succession of little wash illustrations for second rate monthly magazines. Gerald would not mind, would not see the point. He would think he was being broadminded and bohemian to let his wife carry on her own art irrespective of him. But Beatrice saw the point.

He rose from his chair suddenly, his face white with the anger and love he had smothered. Before he could stop himself the words came leaping to his lips:

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

She stood beside the little bare kitchen table, her face raised to his, her eyes bright with startled wonderment at his tone.

"Why did you marry Gerald?"

"Marry Gerald? I?" Some one was coming along the white roadway. From the kitchen window two figures could be seen, and she pointed to them.

"There is Gerald, and that is his wife, my sister Barbara. I am merely an attendant star to the honeymoon. They brought me along to—well, to make the biscuits."

A minute later and Broderick and his bridal couple on the wide veranda under the funny roof. The bride was the girl with the smooth dark hair who had been stamping letters, and she laughed at him.

"I knew who you were, but I wanted Gerald all to myself, and I knew Beatrice would take care of you."

"She did," answered Broderick happily, and as the rest went into the house he paused to brush off traces of flour from his coat collar. But Beatrice burned the biscuit.

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